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THE PHILIPPINE PRESIDENT'S RHETORIC ON JAPAN-CHINA RIVALRY AND INDEPENDENT FOREIGN POLICY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Japan-China rivalry and independent foreign policy (IFP) rhetoric of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Using both AntConc (concordance program) and conventional reading, this study identifies the themes and aspects as to how he used words related to China and Japan in his speeches. Data analysis reveals that his rhetoric centered on several themes, such as historical relations, brotherly and friendly relations, strategic partnership, China as an economic and military superpower, development assistance, and as point of reference, among others. Contrary to what Duterte portrays as IFP, the study shows that even after two years into his presidency, nothing has really changed in the Philippines. His promise of pursuing an IFP policy has neither taken the form of a concrete plan nor materialized as a policy. This paper argues that the ambivalence in Duterte's foreign policy rhetoric is just a strategy to accommodate China's influence while maintaining his nationalist narrative. His IFP rhetoric is just a manifestation of continuing dependency to outside powers. No matter how different it initially seemed to be from previous administrations in the way that it entertains other powers such as China and Japan apart from the US, it still cannot be considered as IFP.

Keywords: Independent foreign policy, Japan-China rivalry, Philippine foreign policy under Duterte, presidential speech analysis, Rodrigo Duterte

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Japan - China competition is commonly studied using the lens of international relations and regional competition (see Chu, 2008; De Castro, 2013) which explain how states become “pro-active” leaders in regional cooperation (see Nabers, 2010; Park, 2013) and look into historical narratives on how the rivalry came about (see Calder, 2006). Other analyses recognize that leadership dynamics can also depend on how the “leadership aspirants” gain acceptance among “potential followers” (Park, 2014) while others ignore perspectives from the less powerful countries and see them as mere passive players (Chu, 2008). In the case of the Philippines, a large volume of research studies either focus their analyses on how its foreign policy would affect rival countries (usually United States, China and Japan) (Morada, 2009) or on the regional issue of South China Sea/West Philippine Sea (SCS/WPS) dispute. It seems that a more local and historical approach in studying the topic is scarce.

A particularly interesting lens to view this is how President Rodrigo Roa Duterte portrays this competition through an analysis of his presidential speeches. While this article aims to analyze the meaning behind the rhetoric, it also tries to picture how Duterte’s foreign policy looked like during his first year in office. Anyone interested in International Relations would say that Duterte’s foreign policy is realist in approach and perspective but what interests many is whether it can be characterized as “bandwagoning” or simply “hedging”. Murphy (2017, p. 168) notes that ideal security atmosphere for small states is a “system equilibrium” as it allows states to freely “maneuver between great powers”. The goal of hedging is

to secure as many benefits as possible from as many states as possible. The principle indicators of hedging include military strengthening without a declared adversary, increased participation in bilateral and multilateral cooperation, the absence of firm balancing or bandwagoning, and the simultaneous improvement in relations with the two greatest regional powers. (Murphy, 2017, p. 174)

Based on Murphy’s definition, Duterte’s foreign policy is a form of hedging and in this case, it is not only balancing the US and China but also other powers such as Japan. Roy (2005, p. 308) posits that the “fear” of Southeast Asian states towards China stems from its geographical proximity and historical experience,” China’s “sheer size”, the “longevity of Chinese civilization” as well as the fact that there are many wealthy ethnic Chinese in these countries. Murphy (2017, p. 175), on the other hand, explains this by saying that Duterte’s foreign policy seems to be bandwagoning for “profit” by “seeking Chinese investment” while also serving as a “response to threat” by “avoiding conflict”.

Basically, this paper aims to analyze the speeches of Duterte particularly on how he talks about diplomacy and international relations – topics that are far from the immediate needs of millions of Filipino people living in poverty. His being a mayor for more than two decades with a special focus on domestic policies makes it even more interesting as he seems to lack experience in foreign policy (see Castillo, 2017; Heydarian, 2017b).

2.0 RECENT STUDIES ON RHETORIC IN PRESIDENTIAL SPEECHES

Some of the most recent studies on Philippine presidential speeches were conducted by Rubic-Rocamora (2018), Serquina (2016), and Quinto (2014). Rubic-Rocamora (2018) selected 30 speeches and analyzed them in terms of linguistic features such as the use of tenses, points of

view (first, second, third person) and related rhetorical strategies. Quinto (2014) on the other hand, examined one translated speech, of which he analyzed how the president positions various elements such as person, time, space, and social relationships in the deictic field. While these authors have valuable contributions in the field, results are more oriented to linguistics rather than political analyses and provided very little discussion on how presidential rhetoric is related to policies. Serquiña's (2016, p. 214) brilliant analysis of three State of the Nation Addresses (SONAs) and eight occasional speeches focused on what former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA) calls as the "greatest export" of the Philippines, the Overseas Filipino Workers. He examined how presidential rhetoric, the phenomenon of migration and politics of labels intertwine not only in the rhetoric of GMA but also in terms of policies. However, primarily due to the small number of speeches analyzed, none of these saw the necessity to use computer-aided technique.

3.0 JAPAN AND CHINA'S PLACE IN PHILIPPINE HISTORY AND THEIR ROLE IN DUTERTE'S "INDEPENDENT FOREIGN POLICY"

The big power rivalry between Japan and China in the Philippines is a relatively new phenomenon. It emerged only when China became the second largest economy in the world and started to provide developing countries with cheaper infrastructure projects with low interest loans. Consequently, the country became a threat to both US and Japan- US being a long-time ally and Japan being the top donor country for the longest time. For several decades, no competition existed due to the fact that the Philippines was perceived as a US bastion in the Asia Pacific. That is why when Duterte announced his own brand of foreign policy ("independent foreign policy"), it was almost certain that it would deviate from the traditional set-up of Philippine foreign diplomacy. The new phenomenon both in the rise of China as one of the competing economic giants and Duterte's independent foreign policy (IFP) should be understood in a longer and larger historical context of Philippine foreign relations.

This idea of IFP is also the reason why Duterte cooperates with non-traditional partner countries framed under the objective of reducing dependency on the US and strengthening relations with China which was not very good during the previous administration due to Aquino's strong anti-China stance in the SCS dispute. Besides, Duterte also seems uncertain about the "sincerity and reliability of the United States as an ally" (Baviera, 2016, p. 204). On a personal level, this "hatred" of US was attributed by analysts to two incidents: one was because of the so-called "Meiring incident" in 2002 which he thought was a "clear violation of his mandate as the mayor" and the other one was when he was denied a US visa (Heydarian, 2017a, p. 232).

Duterte's anti-Western rhetoric also came a time when China became more aggressive economically and politically after it became the world's second largest economy. There were also some uncertainties regarding the US presidency, the resurgence of populism, among others. As a result, Japan and China were considered as important strategic partners of the Philippines not only in terms of trade but also in terms of development assistance. Japan remains the top donor to the country while China is the top trading partner. This IFP dream became evident when he announced the "separation" of the Philippines from the US in his first state visit to China which was seen as an outright rejection of the historical ties between the two traditional allies (Palatino, 2017) and when he invited Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe into his home and kept on referring to the country as a "friend" and a "brother".

Unlike the Philippine relations with US which generally remains constant, relations with China depends on who heads the administration (see Baviera, 2014; De Guzman, 2014). Baviera (2014) posits that domestic factors such as political culture, influence of domestic interest groups, public opinion, or issues of regime legitimacy contribute to changes in foreign policy and Philippines-China relations. In Japan's case, although the Philippines was one of the countries deeply affected by Japanese occupation, it can be said that relations have been improving since World War II. Japan became a destination of Overseas Filipino Workers especially in the 1980s and 1990s before the country imposed stricter rules in mid-2000s. However, on the side of development assistance, it can be said that although Japan is an old time provider through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to the Philippines since 1974 and that China's provision of aid would be difficult to determine because of the country's lack of an aid agency, Duterte seems to lean towards the latter.

Having lived in Mindanao which is very much intertwined with neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia, Duterte has a very strong sense of "Asianness" as seen in his speeches. This is attested to by his many visits to ASEAN countries. In fact, the only non-Asian countries he visited in his first year in office was due to an APEC Summit-related trip to Peru, with a stopover in New Zealand in 2016 and Russia in May 2017. In his first year in office, Duterte visited China twice. The first one was on the 18th to the 21st of October 2016 upon the invitation of President Xi Jinping while the second one was during the Silk Road Summit on the 13th to the 14th of May 2017. Japan, on the other hand was visited by Duterte only once during his first year in office on 26 October 2016. However, Abe visited Duterte in his Davao home in January 2017.

To further emphasize the importance of Duterte's official trips in foreign policy, these should be viewed alongside other trips by former presidents. The Official Gazette of the Philippines listed the US as the country with most frequent trips of the presidents of the Philippines after World War II, except Ferdinand Marcos with four visits to Indonesia and Corazon Aquino with three trips to Japan. It is important to note that Duterte spent more than PhP300 million for his 21 foreign trips in his first year in office. This was a large number in terms of quantity and cost especially when compared to the eight trips Aquino had during his first year in office (Merez, 2017). Because of this, it can be said that although Duterte was a mayor primarily concerned with domestic policies for more than 20 years, he now seems to give a lot of attention to foreign policy.

The historically structured relations between Japan and China in which one country is more prosperous than the other has recently been challenged as China became the second largest economy and Japan fell into third place (Calder, 2006, p. 129). This led to a more heated rivalry between the two countries in Asia. While China is increasingly taking over the traditional recipients of Japanese ODA, Japan is also beginning to take extra steps in countering China through the SCS/WPS dispute.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

This study analyzes the speeches, messages and statements delivered by Duterte himself during his first year in office. The corpus consists of a total of 235 speeches from June 30, 2016 to May 31, 2017, with an average of 21 speeches delivered per month. These were chosen because the materials are carefully planned and have undergone different levels of filters and assessment by presidential staff and advisers. Moreover, speeches are also more structured than interviews and may provide a closer reflection of state policies.

This study aims to provide a glimpse of Duterte's Japan-China rivalry and independent foreign policy rhetoric and narratives. The main reliable source of the texts of Duterte's speeches is the government website (pcoo.gov.ph). The study partly uses AntConc, a free concordance program that lists down words used in a corpus and indicates how many times an item is repeated. It also provides the context as to how the word was used. Nevertheless, the study still relies on conventional reading of the speeches so as not to neglect important details that could not be captured by the computer-aided technique being used.

5.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Duterte's China rhetoric

References to "China" amounted to 610 mentions throughout the whole corpus. His speeches on China centered on themes which included: (i) Chinese ancestry, (ii) strategic partnership, (iii) US-China rivalry, (iv) China as an economic superpower, (v) source of drugs, (vi) SCS/WPS dispute, and (vii) development assistance. Double counting was made whenever a word was mentioned with two possible references. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Duterte's references to China, Chinese and Intsik

	China	Chinese	Intsik
ancestry	2	68	5
development assistance	79	23	3
drugs	40	32	6
engaged in illegal activities	0	4	0
strategic partnership	26	7	0
kidnapping	0	9	1
Russia - China	9	3	1
brother or friend	12	2	0
US - China rivalry	32	6	0
one of the superpowers	14	0	0
point of reference of example	12	6	0
SCS	119	5	0
richest in the Philippines	0	6	0
as a country	31	5	0
organization / proper name	1	2	0
Asian big brother	5	0	0
military power / capacity	6	3	0
infrastructure	12	0	0
ASEAN partner	3	0	0

Duterte mentioned his “Chinese ancestry” 68 times saying that his grandfather (mother’s side) was pure Chinese (five out of 16 times in relation to “Intsik” or its Filipino derogatory translation, 68 out of 165 times in relation to “Chinese” and two out of 429 times in relation to “China”). Interestingly, 69 out of 610 mentions is more than 11 percent of his total mentions of “China” which may lead analysts to think that he is really trying to establish good relations with this nation.

In Duterte’s second State of the Nation Address or SONA, there were four mentions of “China” while there was no mention of Japan at all. All the mentions of China revolved around the idea of friendship, promised help, and a better future. In all his other speeches, China was also portrayed as an economic superpower who can do much more compared to the US,

I do not need your assistance, challenge —Millennium Challenge, 400 million? China is going to release to me 50 billion, go home, I do not need your aid....I’ve been to China, said China, “we will give you something like 15 billion.

(Speech delivered during the Christmas Townhall
with the President, December 19, 2016,
Malacañan Palace)

Duterte also sells the idea that China “understands [the country’s] plight as an agricultural country” and the strongest point would be to sell products such as bananas and pineapples which China promised to import regardless of quality. In October 2016, China lifted ban on the importation of bananas from the Philippines (Department of Trade and Industry, 2017). In one of Duterte’s speeches, he said that,

Our economy has improved after I went to China. I talked there. They were not buying our bananas or anything until I asked them what’s wrong with the bananas, what’s wrong with our importations. They answered well, it’s not about the quality, but they’re talking about geopolitics. [inaudible] they have decided not to.... I did not come here to ask for anything. I am not asking anything. All I was asking was what went wrong with the products. So the bananas: down, nobody would also buy the pineapples.

(Official translation of the speech in Taglish
delivered during the Labor Day celebration,
May 1, 2017, Davao City)

Interestingly, pineapple was mentioned 40 times while banana (“saging” in Filipino) was mentioned 42 times (33 banana; 9 “saging”). What’s interesting here is that pineapple was mentioned the same number of times as “nationalism,” “governance,” and “values.” In this diplomacy of pineapples and bananas, Duterte plays the role of a president who sells the idea of mutual benefit in a relationship that is clearly very unequal right from the very start. In another speech, he said,

But you know, I have yet to hear Americans going to my office for the 23 years that I’ve been mayor, expressing good intentions and about going to business that would help the food and everything. They go there not really for the basics, importation of fruits and everything just what China is doing.

But they go for the mining and all of these things that are really very detrimental to your country.

(Speech delivered during the Philippines-China
Trade and Investment Forum on October 20,
2016, Beijing, PRC)

5.2 Duterte's Japan rhetoric

"Japan" was mentioned 71 times in the corpus, "Japanese" was mentioned 18 times while the Filipino translation "Hapon" was mentioned once, with a total of 90 references to Japan. Duterte's Japan rhetoric revolves around the following: (i) historical references, (ii) Japan as a strategic partner, (iii) Japan as provider of development assistance particularly infrastructure, (iv) Japan as point of reference or example and (iv) Japan as a brother and a friend. Again, double counting was done whenever a word was mentioned with two possible references. This is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Duterte's references to Japan, Japanese and Hapon

	Japan (mentions)	Japanese (mentions)	Hapon (mentions)
historical	0	6	1
development assistance	30	7	0
as a country/ nation	5	2	0
drugs	0	1	0
strategic partnership	20	1	0
point of reference of example	7	1	0
brother or friend	11	0	0
one of the partner / Asian countries	4	0	0

An example of historical references to Japan is the topic of the Japanese Occupation which was mentioned five times. Japan as a strategic partner rhetoric was mentioned 20 times and usually focused on trade relations, and was usually mentioned alongside ASEAN, and other countries such as China, Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, among others. Japan as a provider of development assistance was mentioned most frequently at 30 times. The other mentions are as a "country" or "Asian country" which occurred 11 times, as a point of reference or example which was mentioned seven times and as inventor of "drugs" which was mentioned once.

Although Japan was mentioned only a few times compared to China or the United States or even Russia, most are positive references such as Japan as one of the "friendly neighbors" and even as a "brother". Besides, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo was the only head of state able to visit Duterte in his Davao home in 2017.

In a mixture of Filipino and English, he said:

Mas komportable ako dito sa Japan and even China... Alam mo ang pinakamaano sa atin is ang Japan. Japan talaga ang pinakamalaking tulong natin.. Grabe ang tulong nila... I don't know but Japan is very attached to us. And to the fact that, they are really so very kind. Wala akong ma-ano sa Japanese people except na, so in return, kaya tayong mga Filipino pag napunta sila doon, gusto ko nga iyang protektado sila.

Translation:

I am more comfortable in Japan and even China. Japan is the country which is most helpful to us... they really help us a lot... I don't know but Japan is very attached to us. And to the fact that, they are really so very kind. I can't do anything for the Japanese people except that when they come to the Philippines, I want them protected.

(Speech delivered during a get together with the
Filipino community in Japan on October 25, 2016)

5.3 The Infrastructure narrative and its role in Duterteconomics

A common narrative in Duterte's speeches is the topic of infrastructure which was dubbed by his economic staff as "Dutertenomics". According to the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) (2016), there will be a budget increase for public infrastructure from 5.32 percent of GDP in 2017 to around 7.45 percent of GDP by 2022. This represents an average 6.8 percent of GDP with a total funding requirement of about PhP8.44 trillion (\$168 billion) over the medium term. This is a drastic change compared to 2.9 percent from 2010 to 2016. Even the Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022 (2016) highlights the importance of intensifying infrastructure spending with the promise of making the Philippines a middle income country in the next few decades. But just like other developing countries which lack internal funds to support such grand projects, 48 out of the 75 flagship projects in the NEDA list will be funded by foreign debt through ODA. In spite of this, Duterte consistently claims that the public will not be indebted by these infrastructure projects.

While the earlier part of China's economic development in the 2000s shows complementarity with Japan (Kwan, 2002), the current era can no longer be considered as such. It is now better framed in terms of competition rather than complementarity. As Padilla (2017) argues, the fact that both countries are backing Duterte's "Build, Build, Build" program is "symptomatic" of how the two economic powers see "development cooperation" as one of the key arenas of their competition in the region. The capacity of infrastructure projects to foster soft power and somehow shape and influence countries were already proven by many studies in Asia and even in Africa. Duterte frames China's loans in terms of "altruism and generosity" while the actual interests and other conditionalities accruing from these loans are disregarded (Padilla, 2017).

Menocal, Denney, and Geddes (2011) argue that as the donor marketplace becomes more crowded, it becomes important for donor countries to identify their distinctiveness. Japan does this by stressing that its aid is different from China especially in terms of quality (Trinidad, 2017, p. 24). China's strategy on the other hand is to provide recipient countries with projects that they need in a faster manner that supposedly adheres to the value of non-interference in

local affairs. However, Chinese loans are more expensive at two to three percent interest rate compared to Japan with only .25 to .75 percent interest. The problem however is that Japanese loans are usually processed very slowly (Cigalar, 2018). Interestingly, China started out as a cheaper alternative to Northern donors over the last decades. Yet, at present, traditional donors are portraying themselves as alternative to China's aid only with better quality. Duterte makes this competition very obvious in his speeches. He makes it clear at this point that he just wants infrastructure projects regardless of the source of loans.

5.4 The Independent Foreign Policy (IFP) narrative

Duterte's IFP narrative revolves around the idea of partnership with other sovereign countries in Southeast Asia and beyond. Duterte seems to constantly shift between an anti-American IFP and one that pluralizes Philippine relations with traditional partners like US and Japan towards forming alliances with countries like China. An obvious example of this is the frequent appearance in his speeches not only of China, Japan, and US but also of Russia with 75 counts, Malaysia with 81 counts, and Indonesia with 111 counts. His new foreign policy became official on 30 September 2016 in Davao City immediately after his Vietnam trip on 28 to 29 September 2016. According to Duterte,

My official visit to Vietnam demonstrated our adherence to an independent foreign policy which seeks cooperation and collaboration with friendly nations on the basis of sovereign equality, non-interference, and the mutual respect to protect our national interests.

(Statement following Duterte's official visit to
Vietnam, September 30, 2016, Davao City)

"Independent foreign policy" was only mentioned 13 times in all of his speeches during his first year in office. Duterte claims that his "new foreign policy" will be neutral and frequently repeated his problem with Philippine foreign policy which has always been pro-US. Nevertheless, Duterte continues to abide by the old relations particularly the US-RP Pact.

...We are a sovereign power and I think that we should chart our own. Although, we cannot enter into any military alliance with any other country because of the RP-US Pact, which was signed by our forefathers many years ago. Until now, it is enforced so it would be an incongruity for us to be joining alliances militarily with other countries.

(Speech delivered during the People's Day
celebration, March 29, 2017, Mindoro)

Duterte's anti-US rhetoric was particularly obvious during the Obama presidency. Webb (2017, p. 128) posits that although Duterte is not the first president who popularized the theme on the "hypocrisy of American intervention of the Philippines", his "successful mobilization of a state-led nationalist discourse" demonstrates that the legacy of American intervention continues to haunt the Filipinos up to this day. In the corpus of his speeches, Duterte mentioned "China-US rivalry" 36 times out of the 429 times he used the word "China". As De Castro (2017, p. 17) points out, Duterte's ambition of "appeasing China at the expense of the Philippine-US alliance" became evident during Balikatan in 2017 when he "scaled down" and "refocused" exercises into those relating to humanitarian assistance and disaster and counter-terrorism compared with the usual high-profile live-fire components. Duterte formally announced his supposed "total separation" from the US and his pivot to China in a speech

during the Philippines-China Trade and Investment Forum held in Beijing on 20 October 2016, as shown below.

So with that, I, in this venue, your honors, in this venue, I announce my separation from the United States; (applause) both in military, not with the social rehabilitation, both the military but economics also...Because in the East ASEAN Affairs, Cambodia could not be theirs, 100 per cent, it is an ally of China. Laos? It is always an ally of China. Vietnam? Same thing. Widodo of Indonesia is neutral. Duterte of the Philippines is veering towards China, (applause) because China has the character of an Oriental. (applause) It does not go around insulting people, insisting on policies to follow them and trying to control the money of the world through the IMF and the World Bank. (applause) Dito [Here], Asian Development Bank.

He always threatens to cut ties with the US but does not really act on it. For instance, nothing happened when Lorenzana declared that Duterte wants to halt the 28 Philippine-US military exercises carried out each year (“Lorenzana: aid from the US,” 2016). Besides, despite Duterte’s 10 utterances about the Philippines-US Mutual Defense Treaty which was signed in 1951, he consistently claims that he is powerless to do it.

Duterte delivered four speeches in front of foreign audiences in his first two visits to China and Japan. There were six mentions of “China” in his Japan visits and six mentions of “Japan” in his China visits. He mentioned “China” in his visits to Japan in the context of promising to work closely with Japan on the issue of SCS, reassuring the Japanese that his visits to China were purely economic, and in statements on the matter of security cooperation. In the six mentions of “Japan” in his China trips, half pertains to China’s competition with Japan and other Asian countries while the other half pertains to the money/aid coming from Japan. It is noticeable in these speeches that Duterte is trying hard to please China while playing safe when dealing with Japan. Japan is like an older friend whom he can be honest with but China is a newer friend who needs to be pleased.

Despite the increasing and diversifying security partnerships with China, Russia, and Japan, the US still remains the Philippines’ most important defense partner. Galang (2017), on the other hand, argues that Duterte’s foreign policy should be understood in the context of a “complex international environment” wherein an “unambiguous alignment or identification with one power” is considered as a “luxury which most states can no longer afford”. Chito Sta. Romana, the Ambassador of the Philippines to China, identified three elements of Duterte’s IFP (Galang, 2017). First, Duterte’s IFP lessens Manila’s dependence on Washington while maintaining the historic alliance with the United States. Second, it also improves relations with China particularly economic ties while reducing the tensions caused by the South China Sea dispute. Third, it also improves relations with non-traditional partners such as Russia, Japan, and India while maintaining the “centrality of ASEAN”.

Another obvious component of Duterte’s narrative is that China is a big country that the Philippines should avoid having conflict with: “China is rich and it can gobble up a lot of territory” (Speech during the 7th anniversary of the Federalismo Alyansa ng Bayan, December 8, 2016). In the same speech, Duterte advised that since the Philippines cannot compete with China, it can have greater benefits “if [the country] can just have a settlement with them despite the arbitral judgment”. The fact this was mentioned several times throughout the corpus may

lead to the conclusion that Duterte's IFP is partnered with the narrative of powerlessness. Whenever the SCS/WPS dispute is mentioned, he consistently warns of a massacre that could inevitably happen due to the superior military capability of China and the high probability of the Philippines becoming a battleground. In the 124 mentions of the SCS dispute, 50 of these fall within the powerlessness narrative and thus accounts for about 40.3 percent.

A study by the Pew Research Center in 2017 says that compared to the US, China is perceived more positively with a median of 47 percent that have a favorable opinion and 37 percent unfavorable (Wike, Poushter, Silver, & Bishop, 2017). As for the Philippines, the same study says that notwithstanding the efforts by Duterte to establish closer relations with China, the attitude of the Filipinos towards the country is still the same as it was in 2015. However, it is noticeable how their awareness of China as the world's leading economy increased from 14 percent in 2015 to 25 percent in 2017 (Poushter & Bishop, 2017). Because of this, perhaps more Filipinos view the country as a threat at 47 percent compared to the US at 25 percent (Poushter & Bishop, 2017, p. 3). Overall, the Filipinos are still "more favourable" to the US at 78 percent as compared with China at 55 percent (Poushter & Bishop, 2017, p. 7). It is also interesting how the study found that the Filipinos with favourable view of Duterte rated China positively at 57 percent compared to those who viewed him unfavourably at 40 percent (Poushter & Bishop, 2017, p. 7). However, a Pulse Asia Survey reveals that 20 percent of Filipinos have "a great deal of trust" for Japan while 54 percent answered "a fair amount of trust". As for China, 37 percent says they have "a great deal of trust" while 5 percent says they have "a fair amount of trust". The distrust level is high at 35 percent for "not too much trust" and 28 for "no trust at all". There is an increase in the number of Filipinos with "no trust at all" in China as compared to 22 percent in December 2016.

With just over a year in office, Duterte already visited China and Japan twice. In his six years in office, Benigno Aquino III visited China only twice, Japan six times and the US seven times. A "new chapter" in the relationship between the Philippines and China was mentioned several times in Duterte's speeches. However, the pattern of visits wherein it is always Duterte who goes to China can be likened to how China perceived itself as the Middle Kingdom in the past and how tributaries were the ones who paid visits. For instance, after Duterte's visit to China, he said that Philippine relations with China have "improved dramatically" with Filipino fishermen being able to return and fish in the Scarborough Shoal thanks to China's goodwill. As Duterte puts it,

We're doing well. I'm sure I was correct in going to China and making friends with them. I did not commit a mistake. I said that if you see things that was sprucing up now, it's because of our friendship with China.

(Speech delivered during the inauguration of
Metro Manila Crisis Monitoring & Management
Center, April 4, 2017, Makati)

Unlike Aquino who did not have very good relations with China and who kept mentioning former President GMA in all his speeches, Duterte rarely mentions Aquino except for saying that his tactics weren't any good,

Nung umakyat si Aquino tinabla niya so kaya galit ang China. Galit talaga sa kanya.

Translation:

When Aquino came to power, he stalemated them so China got angry. They are really angry at him.

(Speech delivered during the inauguration of the Filinvest Development Corporation's Misamis Power Plant, September 22, 2016, Misamis Oriental).

Duterte also exploited the idea of Asia for Asians:

I also told him that, you know, we are in Asia, far from the maddening crowd of Europe, it's too far away the Western powers should be worrying about us. Sabi ko, ang swerte natin nandito sa Asia [I said, we are lucky that we are here in Asia] and since China is the leading industrial power, we'll have to ally with them in trade and commerce and eventually improve on the bilateral relations and come out with a vibrant economy

(Speech delivered during an event organized by Department of Agriculture, March 7, 2017, Malacañan Palace)

Unlike the US - China dichotomy throughout his speeches, China and Japan are not portrayed as rivals by Duterte. He refers to them as Asian brother nations, along with the other countries in the region. But whenever he speaks about China and the US, there is always a contrast which is usually antagonistic.

I do not expect United States to die for us so we will just have to navigate our way around here.

(Speech delivered during the inauguration of the Filinvest Development Corporation's Misamis Power Plant, September 22, 2016, Misamis Oriental)

[If] I have to face China, Russia, and United States, then Philippines on one side and they can ask questions. Maybe, I'll just navigate into something like: I am not prepared to talk to the United States at this time. I am not ready to, I said, to exchange barbs there with China. I don't know.

(Speech during the inauguration of Davao International Container Terminal, September 2, 2016)

His downplaying of territorial disputes with China and such acts as removing a memorial for comfort women for Japan for the sake of receiving infrastructure projects says something about the priorities of his administration.

The number of times he mentioned the current heads of state in China, Japan, Russia, and US also presents an interesting point. "Trump" was mentioned 61 times even though he only became president six months after Duterte assumed office, "Putin" 38 times, "Xi Jinping" 33 times and "Abe" 18 times. Almost all mentions were in a non-antagonistic light especially when compared to how he mentioned "Obama" with 118 which were all negative ("Obama, go

to hell”). Interestingly, in the 2017 study of the Pew Research Center, it was found that although “Filipinos have much less trust in Trump than they did in Obama,” he still has the “highest confidence ratings” in the Philippines (Poushter & Bishop, 2017, p. 8).

6.0 CONCLUSION

Duterte’s inclination towards China should be situated in the long history of Philippine foreign policy which has always been pro-US. While it apparently seeks to diversify alliances with non-traditional alliances such as China, it cannot be considered as implying a “separation” from the US.

Overall, Duterte’s IFP rhetoric is a manifestation of continuing dependency to outside powers. No matter how different it initially seemed to be from previous administrations in the way that it entertains other powers such as China and Japan apart from the US, it still cannot be considered as IFP in the proper sense of the concept. The politics of distancing from some powers and accommodation to others are actually narratives of powerlessness and helplessness hiding under the mask of what is ostensibly an IFP. This “new” narrative highlights how diversifying partnership with China, Japan, and other developed countries will benefit the Filipinos but shies away from informing the people about the possible negative consequences of the deals with these countries.

In reality, the Philippines is importing more from these countries than exporting to them. Data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (2017) shows that Philippine imports from China increased by 30.5 percent from \$1.2 billion in 2016 to \$1.75 billion in 2017, making China the country’s largest source of the country’s imports. Meanwhile, Japan placed as the second largest exporter to the Philippines with \$926.18 million accounting for a 5 percent increase from last year. The balance of trade in goods between the Philippines and China is \$900.34 million while the balance of trade with Japan is \$54.82 million. It is obvious that even after two years into his presidency, nothing has really changed in the Philippines. His promise of pursuing an IFP in his speeches has neither taken the form of a concrete plan nor materialized as a policy.

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